

The Use of History

Essential Frontier Missiology: Its Emergence and Flourishing Future

by Steven C. Hawthorne

Editor's Note: This article is a condensed version of an address delivered to the 2014 meeting of the ISFM in Atlanta, GA, on the 40th anniversary of the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization.

Forty years ago, in his Lausanne '74 address, Ralph Winter introduced a different paradigm of mission. What is most often remembered about that address was the focus on people groups instead of on countries. I would contend, however, that Winter offered more than a simple attention shift from nation-states to peoples. In his address and in the following few years, Winter brought three different perceptive ideas together and fused them in a way that soon became a single, operative paradigm. We rightly refer to this paradigm as “frontier missiology.” Four decades later it is fitting for us to reflect on how this way of seeing and doing mission has fared. I think if we are able to identify the essential core of Winter’s paradigm, we can better consider how frontier missiology might be refined, deepened, and furthered.

I will attempt to do three things: First, I will describe the emergence of frontier missiology as a convergence of three distinctive ideas. Then, I will identify a few developments of the frontier missiology paradigm, some of them of dubious worth, but others that indicate its abiding value. Finally, I will point toward some promising ways to continue developing and deepening essential frontier missiology.

The Emergence of Frontier Missiology: A Fusion of Three Ideas

The headwaters of what would become known as frontier missiology were flowing long before the Lausanne Congress. For example, in 1972, a “Consultation of Frontier Missions,” was held with significant participation. The report of that gathering, called *The Gospel and Frontier Peoples*, edited by R. Pierce Beaver, shows that terms such as “unreached peoples” and “frontier missions” were in use well before Lausanne (Beaver 1972, 4).

Earlier yet, Donald McGavran had begun to give shape to what we now call frontier missiology. His emphasis on church growth was resolutely focused on observable and measurable outcomes of evangelism—most notably, that evangelized people were those who were incorporated into ongoing Christian fellowship.

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The fruition, or outcome of evangelism, was always to be growing churches. With such an outlook on what the work of evangelism accomplishes, it became possible to think of doing sufficient evangelism to fulfill a global task instead of merely doing more evangelism.

This goal-oriented way of thinking found its way into the name given to the Lausanne Congress.¹ It was “The International Congress on World Evangelization” instead of repeating the name of the earlier 1966 “World Congress on Evangelism” in Berlin. Years later Winter would say,

Strategically, Lausanne changed one key word from Berlin: the World Congress on *Evangelism* of 1966 became the...International Congress on World *Evangelization* in 1974—the word evangelism being a never-ending activity, and evangelization being intended to be a project to be completed. Here in embryo, was the concept of closure. (Parsons 2015, 181)

At Lausanne '74 McGavran used his plenary address at Lausanne to declare evangelism as a goal-focused endeavor:

The goal of world evangelism is not merely “a church of Jesus Christ” in every nation. To state the task that way is to misunderstand it. The true goal is to multiply, in every piece of the magnificent mosaic, truly Christian churches which fit that piece, are closely adapted to its culture, and recognized by its non-Christians as “our kind of show.” (McGavran 1975, 101)

The basic elements of frontier missiology had been introduced before Lausanne, but at that Congress and in the years that followed, Winter fused three ideas into an operative paradigm.

The Agent of Evangelization: Evangelizing, Same-Culture Churches
Moving beyond well-worn discussions of the day about the role of foreign missionaries amidst national workers, Winter claimed that local people—not just evangelists, but local church movements—were capable of doing a more powerful kind of evangelism than foreign

missionaries might ever be able to do. The most effective agent of evangelization was a movement of same-culture churches.² In 1974 Winter described them as “strong, ongoing, vigorously evangelizing denominations.” Sometime in the 1980s the term “church planting movements” came into use. These kind of church movements were so likely to sustain robust, relevant evangelism that the eventual evangelization of an entire people could be recognized as effectively accomplished by their presence.

The Scope of Evangelization: Every People

Winter fused the idea of church movements as the *agent* of evangelism with a different way of framing the



scope of world evangelization: Instead of directing evangelism ventures toward countries or individuals, the task was best defined as accomplishing evangelization within and throughout every people group. Winter declared that the goal was “a strong, powerfully evangelizing church in every tribe and tongue” (Winter 1975, 216). Not only was this task something that could be finished; aiming at anything less would be tantamount to leaving entire peoples without effective gospel witness. It was never suggested that frontier mission was merely a tactical procedure, or “a people group approach” that would offer a quicker, slicker methodology. Defining the task in terms of people groups tended to highlight the

complexity and difficulty of evangelizing the remaining peoples.

The Hope of Evangelization: Envisioning the Task Finished

Winter’s 1973 article, “Seeing the Task Graphically,” was actually a treatise on how to see the task *globally*. At the entrance to the Lausanne Congress a population clock steadily ticked upward, counting how many more individuals needed to be evangelized. Winter referred to it (Parsons 2015, 160–161), but this clock actually became an anachronism in his way of thinking. While every soul matters, what mattered far more were the peoples, regardless of how many persons there might be. In Winter’s mind another kind of clock was ticking relentlessly. We might call it a “*kairos* clock” or a “kairometer”—one that measures the movement of history toward its culmination. And that is the third idea, a forward-moving dynamism of hope that impels mission toward fulfillment.

Aiming to plant churches in ethnic contexts was not really a new idea to those touched by the church growth movement. I think that the most forceful new element of frontier missiology was Winter’s confidence that the entire global task must and will be finished within history.

I’m not the only one who found this the most inspiring and motivating dimension of what Ralph Winter was setting forth. He was saying, “After all these centuries, here is where we now stand. Look now at what lies ahead—we are almost finished!” Winter’s way of spinning out a great story was a tremendously significant part of the whole approach to frontier mission: an all-encompassing, multi-millennial story in which everyone felt that they were living in a larger, longer endeavor than the immediacies around them.

Developments, Both Dubious and Definitive

In the years that followed Lausanne, Winter clarified and restated these basic strands of frontier missiology.

One of the most succinct articulations of frontier missiology was the watchword, first introduced in 1980 at the World Consultation on Frontier Missions, held in Edinburgh: “A Church for Every People by the Year 2000.”

be contained, tamed, organized, and executed with managerial skills, feasible goals, and measurable objectives. In my view, the epithet, “managerial missiology,” may have been an accurate description of some of the earliest

which sounded simplistic, as if people groups were bounded, discrete, changeless, and non-overlapping. In his portrayal of the “magnificent mosaic” of humanity, McGavran tended to talk about each piece as discrete,

In the watchword we see all three ideas (see top of left column):

A Church: *The agency of a culturally-appropriate movement of churches.*

For Every People: *The global scope, defining the task as reaching every people group.*

By the Year 2000: *The hope of finishing the task, culminating a great, rolling story.*

The strategic simplicity of frontier missiology in the late 1970s and early 1980s was vulnerable to misperception and misrepresentation. Some critics saw it all as simplistic, jingoistic, and little more than shallow pragmatism and sloganeering. But in practice, mission leaders and scholars tested the strategic simplicity of the ideas amidst the complexity of field realities from Morocco to Malaysia.

Winter and others made attempts to clarify and add nuance to frontier missiology so that it would prove itself in field operations and not merely serve as a provocative challenge in mission conferences or as a pitch for missionary recruitment. In the subsequent swirl of discussions there were a few fumbles and foibles—a few dubious developments that we can now recognize as such with the benefit of hindsight.

Problematic Issues

Of the many miscues and missteps, several served to challenge and to clarify frontier missiology.

1. Undercurrents of Colonialism and “Managerial Missiology”

To some in the global south, the practice of identifying and listing “target” distinctive people groups seemed to be animated by a “divide and conquer” colonial mentality. Many dismissed the notions of the “can do” Americans (Ralph Winter, Pete Wagner, Ed Dayton, Ted Engstrom, and others) who appeared to some non-Western leaders that they thought God’s mission could

efforts to present the idea of people groups. Ed Dayton, head of MARC, often described his efforts as helping to bring management expertise to accomplishing the goals of global mission. Conceding that some early articulations of frontier missiology may have been overly pragmatic can only help us to find the best framework that is as biblical as it is fruitful.

2. Misunderstandings of Prioritization

At Lausanne ’74 Ralph Winter described cross-cultural evangelism among the peoples yet without church movements as the “highest priority.” Yet to many of that time, and still today, mission is always a matter of responding to the most urgent, pressing needs. Every missionary was then presumably responding to the most critical needs that they knew. Thus, there was predictable pushback on the claim of priority:

People in Mexico City are going to hell, too! We’ve got needs all over the world, so what gives you the privilege of calling your “unreached peoples” the greatest need? Why are those lost people a higher priority?

This still takes place today when unreached peoples are presented as desperately needy peoples. Unreached people groups are not the *neediest* peoples. They are the *remaining* peoples in the global task.

3. Discrete Ethnic Units

At Lausanne ’74 McGavran’s own term for peoples was “ethnic units,”

but other leaders (especially those who were stewards of lists of peoples) acknowledged greater complexity, including significant subsets, associations, clusters, and networks. The forces of globalization, migration, and urbanization obviously scrambled any notion of detached, distinct, never-changing people groups. Yet, no matter how many nuances are factored into the defining of peoples, the misperception persists that frontier missiologists assume that their lists of “Unreached People Groups” (UPGs) are all discrete ethnic units, to be uniformly checked off the lists when reached.

4. Mistakes in Mobilization

Some attempts to popularize frontier missiology introduced confusion in definition as well as conflicting lists and terms. It became tiresome in the early 1980s to hear jokes about finding “hidden” peoples. Initially, MARC’s list of peoples was an open-source kind of “wiki” ethnography to which almost anyone could suggest unreached people groups, introducing considerable confusion. An oft-mentioned example of a vaguely defined group was “night nurses in St. Louis.” A people group or not?

5. Reverting to Geography

Luis Bush and the AD 2000 and Beyond Movement used the “10/40 Window” to campaign for closure. Many observers presumed that every advocate of frontier missiology was

also an exponent of the 10/40 Window. Yet Ralph Winter never advocated the 10/40 Window. He thought the concept was a setback because it emphasized geography over ethnicity. It shifted the focus back from “who” (the peoples) to “where” (the countries).

6. *The Timeline Toward AD 2000*

For a time, the concerted effort to precipitate collaborative action by the year 2000 seemed to work well to exploit millenarian enthusiasm. Those who were present at the Edinburgh event in 1980 will remember that the year 2000 seemed to be a generation away. In fact, the Edinburgh watchword was an intentional way to restate the Student Volunteer Movement rallying cry of “the evangelization of the world in this generation.” Yet as the 1990s progressed, it became clear, even to the most zealous mission leaders, that even if there were suddenly tens of thousands of new missionaries, there would not be time for them to pursue wise entry strategies of prolonged language and culture learning. The clock was ticking with more people groups on the unreached list than there were days remaining in the millennium. Accusations of sloganeering began to hit with full force. Most seasoned practitioners of frontier mission quietly backed away from trying to orchestrate closure by AD 2000 or any other date. The experience may have caused some to lose interest in pursuing a goal of closure. On the other hand, pressing beyond the artificial millennial finish line actually tempered the resolve of many to pursue frontier mission with a persistent, unhurried urgency.

Proving the Paradigm

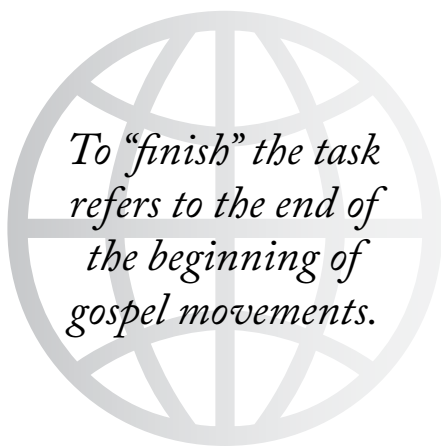
Even while these difficulties were unfolding there were other definitive developments that have tested, clarified, and proven the paradigm.

1. *Increasing Biblical and Theological Depth*

For many evangelicals in the 1970s, an adequate biblical “basis” for mission had been largely limited to a catalog of verses in two categories: imperatives

(the “go ye” verses) and universals (texts on “all” or “every” nation, the “ends of the earth,” and others). But biblical scholarship in the 1970s and 1980s inclined evangelicals to follow methods of biblical theology that featured key themes such as the kingdom of God and the glory of God as seen unfolding throughout the scriptures.

Evangelicals gave heed to John Stott’s call at Lausanne ’74 to explore and to use the entire Bible as the best framework for mission (Stott 1975). In the past forty years, there have been several contributions towards a rich biblical theology of mission, some of them specifically focused on frontier mission. For example, the Abrahamic covenant to bring blessing to all nations had



been examined by John Stott in the 1970s. Christopher Wright continued and deepened those ideas in the 1990s (Wright 2006, 194–264). Walter Kaiser’s early work on the Abrahamic promise as the mandate for mission³ encouraged Ralph Winter to anchor frontier mission in God’s promise to Abraham that his people were to become a blessing for all peoples.

John Piper’s biblical theology of the glory of God has become widely known, particularly in his book, *Let the Nations Be Glad!* (Piper 1993). It was developed with careful exegetical substance and theological depth, but with the practice and purpose of frontier mission always in view. There are

other examples, but without question, frontier missiology has found biblical footing and framing that is far more substantive than what was in use forty years ago.

2. *Comprehensible: Easily Understood and Passed On*

The fundamental framework of frontier mission has shown itself to be something that makes sense to Christians all over the world. In recent decades, specialized marketing, mushrooming migration, and identity politics have magnified the commercial and political importance of distinctive peoples and social communities. Ethnic and socio-economic identities are more readily recognized as critical to gospel communication. And the related increase in numbers of churches worldwide which honor distinctives in culture—language, the arts, and music—is likewise more widely comprehended and valued.

Yes, there are subtleties, but they are not hard to clarify. For example, to “finish” the task actually refers to the end of the beginning of sustained gospel movements. The term “unreached” is often misunderstood as meaning that people have yet to hear the name of Jesus. The term actually has more to do with the absence of a following of Jesus in specific peoples. We’ve seen that such points of confusion are not difficult to straighten out. Frontier mission makes as much sense now as it did decades ago.

3. *Proven by Sustained and Fruitful Efforts*

In the past forty years thousands of mission efforts have been directed toward unreached people groups. Some endeavors have been underway for decades. Some have borne much fruit while others have seen few people following Christ. But still these efforts keep going. We have witnessed a steady increase of maturity and practical wisdom, forged in the fires of opposition and hardship.

Of course there have been many failures, and even more diversions: workers start to work with a particular

unreached people, but instead soon find themselves helping the youth group at a long-established church, or something like that. But for all the setbacks, we have seen amazing perseverance by workers and the churches that send them. If frontier mission were just sloganeering, many more workers would have quit long ago. But people are sticking with it with remarkable verve.

To Supersede or To Simplify Frontier Missiology?

Some have proposed alternative missiologies to replace or supersede frontier missiology because they view frontier missiology as dated idea from a bygone era. Considering alternative missiologies has moved me to respectfully disagree. Frontier missiology is not outdated, certainly not in the sense that it needs to be surpassed. I find that other missiologies do not compete, but actually complement, and are empowered by, frontier missiology.

Alternatives Express and Extend Frontier Mission

There are two candidate missiologies that are most often proposed as alternatives to frontier mission: urban missiology and diaspora missiology. When I've quizzed and read urban missiologists, asking them to tell me what urban missiology is all about, I usually hear something like,

You have to get right into the city. You've got to exegete your city. And that means finding out who is there. Explore the different relationships. Find out what makes the networks work. Discover the systems and cycles. Study the socio-political tapestries and mosaics of different groupings. Find out who is excluded or segmented from everyone else.

Such responses reveal the overlap with frontier missiology, including the emphasis on distinctive cultures, subgroupings, and communication networks. In both frontier and urban approaches, our task is to ensure that no set or network of people is overlooked.

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Likewise, with diaspora missiology, which begins with the abiding continuities of ethnic and communal identities. I've heard diaspora missiology called "frontier mission on steroids" because of its emphasis on tracking the scope and mobility of peoples and how the same families can hold to a multiplicity of identities. These communal identities serve as the same bridges of God long highlighted in frontier missiology.

The Enduring Necessity of Frontier Missiology

One of the most significant tests of frontier missiology took place on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the Lausanne '74 consultation. This 2004 Forum for World Evangelization, held in Pattaya, Thailand, and sponsored by the Lausanne Committee, gathered more than 1500 participants from 130 countries in thirty-one mini-consultations, each one focusing on "critical issues confronting the church in the 21st century" (Claydon 2005, vii). Several of the thirty-one "Issue Groups" were indeed focused on broad topics related to mission, such as globalization, gender, religious nationalism, bioethics, and more. Other "Issue Groups" focused on mission activities such as media and technology, the arts, orality, theological education, and prayer. Still other groups focused on particular kinds of people, among them children, Muslims, "at risk" people, Jewish people, people with disabilities, and a few more.

Among the many groups covering this wide array of topics there was no group expressly focused on unreached people groups. I was told that this was by design by the organizers of the forum. When I asked one of the leaders why such a significant aspect of the Lausanne movement had been purposely omitted, he said something about wanting to be ready for the 21st

century. Dozens of leaders from many parts of the world had noticed this exclusion long before the event.

The focus of one group was "Hidden and Forgotten People." That particular group was supposed to focus on people with disabilities as well as people described as those who had "never heard the name of Jesus." Disabled people are of course often overlooked and well deserving of a full discussion. But instead, consultation planners insisted that any discussion about unreached people groups would have to be a piece of a broad conversation about ministry to disabled persons.

Several leaders, not wanting to diminish the importance of ministry to disabled people, and at the same time, adamantly passionate about completing the task among all peoples, organized a way for those focused on unreached people groups to meet separately. No rooms were available in the venue for this unofficial thirty-second issue group, so chairs were brought to a lightly-trafficked, top-floor escalator landing. Dozens of leaders found their way to this improvised consultation. In order to participate, most of them had to opt out of their expected places in other issue groups.

More than fifty people participated, most of them from non-Western lands. An agenda was planned and pursued with robust and invigorating discussions. The group called itself "Ministry among Least Reached People Groups." It was decided by the Forum organizers, with some consternation, that a report about unreached people groups could be offered to the general assembly, as every other issue group did. But its report would have to share time with Group 6, which had come to call itself "Ministry Among People with Disabilities."⁴

I hasten to say that after the 2004 Forum, the Lausanne Committee leadership consistently recognized unreached and unengaged peoples as an uppermost concern of many in world evangelization. The Cape Town Commitment clearly highlights this priority. I may have mistakenly recalled some of the details, but I mention this event as a telling demonstration of the enduring reality of frontier missiology. In the eyes of some academic and church leaders, even those who were dedicated to world mission as leaders in the Lausanne movement, the day of focusing on people groups in mission had long passed. By contrast, it was actually non-Western leaders and field practitioners who insisted instead that finishing the task among least-reached peoples was of enduring importance. For many it still remains the highest priority.

Not the Sunset of Frontier Mission

Therefore, let frontier mission thinkers and practitioners embrace and empower partnership with other missiologies. In my view, frontier missiology has proven its durative value. It is not going away. If something were going to replace it, I think we would have seen it by now.

We have good reason to refine, simplify and deepen our thinking and practice of frontier mission. Now more than ever. Why? If we are able to identify and cultivate what is essential, it will make frontier missiology more, not less, useful in diverse contexts of the ever-changing world.

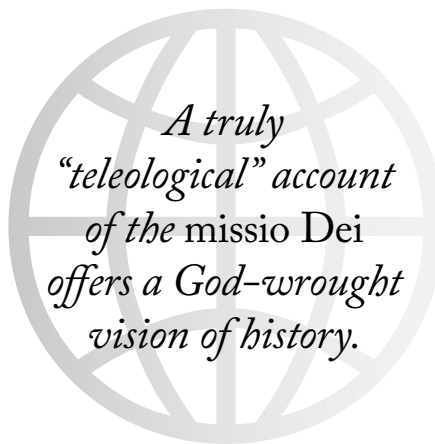
At this anniversary we stand at an important threshold. The testing and tempering of frontier missiology in the past decades should embolden us to refine, deepen, and refresh the practice of frontier mission and the theology that drives it. I would dare to say that we stand at the sunrise, not the sunset, of frontier mission.

Toward an Essential Frontier Missiology: A Flourishing Finish

To better extend, simplify, and strengthen frontier missiology, I want

to identify the core ideas of an “essential frontier missiology.” The word “essential” reminds us to look for what is germane, vital, and fruitful in diverse settings. I will describe these core ideas by pointing toward some helpful ways forward.

I propose that we refine and cultivate an essential frontier missiology that features three elements: (1) a *missio Dei* framework that is teleological but also relational; (2) a more ample theology of ethnicity; and (3) a “Christotelic,” embodied, transformative ecclesiology. These are the same three components that I claimed were fused by Ralph Winter 40 years ago, but we will examine them in reverse order.



A Missio Dei Framework, Teleological and Relational

By “teleological” I mean purposive. A truly teleological account of the *missio Dei* provides a God-wrought, all-encompassing vision of history. It is really a vision of God himself pursuing His purpose relentlessly through succeeding generations to the present day, and as promised, to the culmination of the age.

A Teleological or Purposive Framework

The most common formulations of *missio Dei* feature remembrances of the former deeds of God—his people-saving, justice-bringing, or peace-making activities. These are regarded as patterns of service, exemplified in Jesus, that the church is now expected

to continue or to copy. The difficulty with this model is that mission swiftly becomes a mode of compassionate activism. The goals of this way of mission are easily co-opted to advance different ideals or ideologies. Instead, we need a robust *missio Dei* formulation that calls for more than a mere *emulation of* Jesus’ example, but one that summons us to an actual *collaboration with* the living, risen Christ as he accomplishes his purpose.

I like Richard Bauckham’s little book *Bible and Mission*, in which he traces a triple trajectory in the Scriptures: blessing, revelation (or glory), and then God’s kingdom (Bauckham 2003, 27). These three strands are coherent, intertwining trajectories running throughout the Bible. Together they describe God’s pursuit of bringing blessing among all nations, worship of all peoples, and Christ’s lordship in all the earth. Bauckham notes that this narrative framework is a “non-modern metanarrative” in which there is not the domination of many by a privileged few. Rather, the one who gains ascendancy is one made worthy by his suffering for all (Bauckham 2003, 90). This distinction is critical for a post-modern context, where frontier mission can very easily seem to be a religious conquest of all peoples. Confidence to pursue his mission can be sustained with a full-blown biblical theology that focuses on the singular glory of the Lamb who was slain.

A Relational Purpose

I’ve already mentioned John Piper’s work, recognized for highlighting the glory of God in mission. He is rightly known for his single-sentence theology of mission, which is as beautifully teleological as it can be: “Missions exists because worship doesn’t” (Piper 1993, 17). Piper has helped us immensely by exhuming the Puritan theology of God’s glory that at one time was the central theological idea driving mission in pre-revolutionary, colonial America. Shortly after William Carey’s *Enquiry*

popularized the Matthew 28 commission, the doxological ideas of Jonathan Edwards came to have diminished influence.⁵ In recent years, Piper, along with many others, has revived Puritan theology⁶ and helped inspire widespread passionate zeal for the glory of God.

There is more to doxology and mission than just God's glory being known. Ultimately, God purposes to be loved. He cannot be loved unless he is known. God's purpose is marvelously relational. He has purchased people from every tribe and tongue to obey, serve, worship, and love him.

Such an approach to the *missio Dei* gives us a far better way of seeing and pursuing closure. Instead of ticking off line items on a list of UPGs, it can be our ambition to anticipate the joy of the Father to have his full family restored to him, some from every tribe and tongue. Closure then becomes a pursuit of relational fullness with God instead of merely a reduction of our list of people groups to zero. Mission is ultimately not our project to finish, but his purpose to fulfill.

Cameron Townsend said that the parable of the lost sheep (Matthew 18:12–14) guided the difficult decisions he made to launch Wycliffe Bible Translators. It's interesting that Jesus begins this parable by asking, "What do you think?" Surely he wants us to have the parable affect our thinking. If a man with 100 sheep finds that one of them has gone astray, he does not say, "Well, I'll take one percent less. It's an acceptable loss. We can allow for a little shrinkage." No. In the parable he leaves the 99 and goes for that one. Perhaps in frontier mission the only numbers we really need are 99 and 1. If there is still any people yet to be gathered back to God, then the seek-and-save mission continues.

The Enduring Joy of Fulfillment Vision
Jesus spoke of the joy of anticipating the fulfillment of God's promise when he declared to some Jews, "Your father

The God-oriented vantage point recognizes the distinctive worth of each of the peoples, and yet celebrates the beauty of all peoples.

Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad" (John 8:56).

The poetic structure of these sentences, with the double parallel of seeing and rejoicing, was framed in a chiasmic structure. That structure calls attention to the significance of the day of Christ. When he said, "My day," was Jesus referring to his three years of ministry? Or was he referring to present days, when his people co-labor with the resurrected Lord? Or was he speaking of the end of the age when he will return? Yes. I think it's all the day of Christ.

Four thousand years ago Abraham saw the coming day of Christ. He was counting stars, but in that night sky he saw the day of Christ, a day when multiplied millions from all the peoples of the earth would belong to the faith family. These would become the long-promised blessing amidst all peoples. The vision stirred him, moving his emotions with joy. He saw the day and said, "Bring it." He and Sarah died without receiving the promise, but the account says that they "welcomed" that day "from a distance" (Hebrews 11:13). If they could see the fulfillment of the promise from 4,000 years, perhaps we can lift our eyes and find ourselves moved with the same faith-filled joy.

I think that jealousy for God's glory, ablaze with the visionary joy of hope, can capture the hearts of entire generations and give them stamina to pursue costly work.

A More Ample Theology of Ethnicity

The multi-culturalism of our day propounds the idea that all peoples are of equal worth. Within the limited bounds of secular worldviews, which is to say, devoid of a supreme deity who perceives and appraises all things, there can be nothing better than simple equality. But in truth, the peoples are

more than merely equal. They are precious in the sight of God.

Beyond Equality: Before God

In his plenary address at Lausanne '74, Donald McGavran pointed out a way toward a more adequate theology of ethnicity for frontier missiology. He quoted a verse of scripture in which we see the peoples gathering to God as worshipers, each of the tribes, tongues, and kinship groups exhibiting the redeemed glories of their distinctive cultures. McGavran said,

God has no favorites among cultures. He accepts them all. We read in Revelation 21:26 that the "wealth and the splendor of the nations" shall be brought into the Holy City. Kings of the earth bring in all their splendor. In stream all the beautiful cultures of mankind; hour after hour, day after day, the glories of the nations march in. (McGavran 1975, 96)

Although McGavran is certainly correct about God having "no favorites among cultures," I think we could agree that God does have "favorites" in this sense: God considers each of the peoples to be his favorite people. I have three daughters. I have sometimes said that each one of them is my favorite daughter. How is that possible? Each of my three daughters is uniquely lovely and wise. Each of them can demonstrate family values, extend honor, and show the beauty of love in ways that are unique. Any parent can see why I can say that they are each my favorite daughter.

Considering how parents prize the unique love they receive from each of their children can help us appreciate God's delight in the redeemed glories of every culture and people. Such a God-oriented vantage point offers a way to recognize the distinctive worth of *each* of the peoples, and yet also to celebrate

the beauty of *all* of the peoples together, who have somehow been formed into one worshipping people in Christ.

All Nations and All Generations

We see a similar perspective in Ephesians 2 and 3. Writing to Gentile churches in Ephesus, Paul begins 3:1 with “For this reason,” pointing to what he has said in chapter 2 about one global household of God’s people (2:19), worshipping God together as one great, global house of worship (2:20–22). In 3:14 Paul repeats the phrase, “For this reason,” and then says, “I bow my knees before the Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name.” The Greek term used for family in this text is *patria*, a term emphasizing lineages or groupings with generational depth.⁷

Paul considers the fatherhood of God as a far greater matter than the adoption of individuals as his children. Each one of the families that have any kind of generational depth is known to him. He has named each one. This means that each of them has a particular history, destiny, identity, and value. Each one of them is precious. No wonder the great prayer concludes with glory abounding to God, not only “in the church,” but also “in Christ” in a way that encompasses “all generations” (3:21). This may be something beyond what “we ask or think” (3:20), but we have more work to do—to inquire and to ponder—in recognizing how God works to culminate the ethno-history of every people. If he is the God of all nations, he must also be the God of all generations.

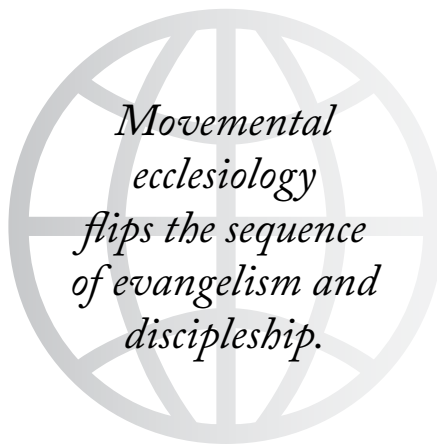
A Christotelic, Embodied, Transformative Ecclesiology

Frontier mission is ostensibly focused on the presence or absence of church movements. Thus, churches are of highest importance. And yet there are significant gaps and weaknesses in frontier ecclesiology. Church growth teaching tended to emphasize the evangelistic potential of churches. In his Lausanne address, Winter persuasively claimed that near-neighbor, same-culture churches were

capable of a “more powerful” evangelism. A good many frontier mission thinkers and practitioners have tended to see churches in a utilitarian light, viewing the church as a means of mission, but not its goal. I think, however, we are now seeing some helpful developments that point toward richer, simpler theory and practice concerning churches.

The church is the instrument by which Christ accomplishes the goal of God’s mission. But the church is also the goal itself. It can be both goal and instrument because Christ himself is the living reality and end-accomplishing force of the church.

I use the newly coined word “Christotelic” to describe a growing reality—the



global church—that Christ himself will bring to maturity and cause to fulfill its purpose. The term “Christotelic” is composed of the suffix “-telic,” derived from the Greek word *telos* meaning end, goal, or purpose. The term Christotelic has the intended dual meaning that Christ is himself the goal, while at the same time, he is the one who accomplishes the fullness of God’s purpose. Once again, McGavran probably pointed us in a good direction by referring to people movements as “Christ-ward movements.”

“Movemental” Ecclesiology: The Embodiment of the Risen Jesus

Many church planters consider churches as living entities that thrive and bear fruit by multiplying. Seen

as a living organism, the church is essentially the risen Jesus himself, joined with those who obey him in faith together. As communities of people obey Jesus together, they become, by his Spirit, an embodiment of Jesus.

Seeing the multiplying life of Christ abound amidst the simplest communities has given some church planters greater confidence in the sufficiency of the word of God and the Spirit of God. Christ himself guides and grows his churches in pioneer settings without the immediate oversight of foreign workers. We’ve recognized that such organic, simple life can be astoundingly fertile so that cascading, multiplying movements flourish.

Without question one of the most significant developments in recent years is the recognition of the phenomenon of church planting movements (CPM), or, as many describe them, disciple making movements (DMM). As people obey the word of God by the Spirit of Christ in communities, new followers help others to obediently follow Christ. Movements often thrive and multiply rapidly. As we learn more about these movements, our ideas of church, evangelism, and discipleship are shifting. Some are groping for new terms for what we may come to call “movemental” ecclesiology.

Many mission leaders have to admit that they have been surprised by the reversal of the sequence of evangelism and discipleship. It has been customary for evangelicals to see evangelism as coming first, resulting in newly born again believers. Standard practice after evangelism has been to follow up with what is often called discipleship, with the goal of bringing about maturity and obedience to Christ. Movemental ecclesiology flips the sequence. The initial stage of discipling helps people to read or hear the scriptures in such a way that they are challenged to begin obeying Christ. As people learn to obey the word of God, many soon come to experience the joy of trusting and walking with Jesus along with

others. Having encountered Christ in a living way, it is not long before they confirm their repentance and confession of faith. Instead of evangelizing to produce disciples, we are discipling to accomplish evangelization amidst a community of people.

A People of Blessing in the Midst of Every People

Frontier missiology has groped for a way to show the immense value of missiological breakthrough in every people. Why are these new church movements of such paramount importance? What should we expect in reached peoples? What will happen in an evangelized world? What will all the newly planted churches in every people group actually do? What are they for?

It does not satisfy to respond to such questions with talk about making Jesus come back. As thrilled as anyone should be to anticipate Christ's return, we are people of promise who, like Abraham, rejoice to see that Christ's day has dawned. Already we have seen every kind of human flourishing when missionaries have been free to work (Woodberry 2009). There should be even greater anticipation for what churches might bring about as they are encouraged to become the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham: "In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 22:18).

I've said elsewhere that

God intends that Christ-following communities become His long-promised blessing, bringing forth tangible realities of righteousness, peace and sustained evangelism for His glory. As God's people pursue this aspect of mission they seek to abound in good deeds in every dimension of life, society and the created order. (Hawthorne 2015, 1)

The Abrahamic promise can provide Christ-following communities with a rich identity as God's people in the midst of all peoples. Of course, following Christ often stretches or breaks relationships, even with close

T*he biblical promises and stories of blessing may be the most ample biblical theology we will find for what we mean by transformation.*

family members. But God does not require people to repudiate family ties and customs in order to follow Christ. Followers of Christ continue in the same ethnic and cultural identity of their birth. And yet they are different, pursuing justice and righteousness (Genesis 18:18–19), praying and laboring for the good of their neighbors, expecting that God will bring forth miraculous measures of transforming blessing amidst their communities.

I'm convinced the biblical promises and stories of blessing provide the best biblical theology for what we mean by transformation. The biblical idea of blessing touches every realm of life: economics, art, industry, agriculture, ecology, and more beside. Blessing refers to God's intended goodness—a God-desired fullness and a fruitfulness. For example, we see such blessing and transformation when the book of Genesis reaches its crescendo, where Abraham's great-grandson Joseph brings "great deliverance" and tangible blessing to a large part of the earth (Genesis 41:53–57, 45:7).⁸

The promise of blessing can embolden us to pursue a wide and abounding mission that brings about both good for the nations and glory to God. We may find ourselves delighting in so-called "regular" mission⁹ as much or more than the instrumental stage of frontier mission. If anything, such hope strengthens our resolve to accomplish the strategic priority of church movements in every people since the inception of such movements is altogether necessary to bring forth the ongoing blessing and fruit of Christ's Lordship.

A People of Worship Formed from All Peoples

We need an ecclesiology that celebrates every local expression of church to be part of a global people of worship

before God. To form the needed theology of a worshiping people, we need to re-examine many themes and texts. For example, there have been many taking a fresh look at Acts 15 to help navigate contextualization issues.

At the council in Jerusalem, James' statement in Acts 15:14–18 provides a narrative framework, defined by biblical history and prophecy, in which to understand the work of God in the turning of Gentiles to serve the Lord. James claims that what God had done with Peter, and therefore also with Paul, was the beginning of a fulfillment of a long-awaited cluster of prophecies having to do with a later exodus, and a greater house.¹⁰

"God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name" (Acts 15:14). The exodus motif would have been clear to everyone by the expression that God had "concerned Himself" (Greek: from *episkeptomai*). This language is almost identical to God's announcement that he was initiating a deliverance from Egypt, "I am indeed concerned (*episkeptomai* in the Septuagint) about you and what has been done to you in Egypt" (Exodus 3:16, see also 4:31). By using the word "first" James was announcing that they were at the beginning, or the first stages, of a fulfillment of an anticipated season of history.

James declares that in the mission work of Peter and Paul, God had begun to accomplish a new exodus by the formation of a worshiping people (Greek: *laos*) constituted by persons from diverse peoples (Greek: *ethne*) for his name, or his greater glory. Then, in verses 15 through 18 comes a litany of allusions and quotations of four or five different prophets, particularly Amos 9:11–12, that together describe the raising up of a new house of worship.

Some scholars see one of the allusions as Jeremiah 16:12, which states that God-honoring Gentiles will someday “be built up in the midst of My people” (Bauckham 1995).

In this light, God was gathering peoples to become part of his people, giving them a way to worship God as holy, having been cleansed by the Holy Spirit himself (Acts 15:8–9) rather than by the strictures of proselytization (15:1, 5).

The model Paul declares in the letter to the Romans is virtually the same: that there would be a mutual reception, among Jews and Gentiles as worshipers together, not as becoming the same ethnicity, but honoring cultural differences and ethnic identities. The crescendo of Paul’s argument is that people of different ethnicity and styles of obedience would receive each other just as they had already been received by God as worshipers: “Therefore, receive one another, just as Christ also received us to the glory of God” (Romans 15:7). Paul supports the great hope that “with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (15:6) with another litany of prophecies (15:9–13). We would do well to follow the example of the early church to find our identity as God’s worshiping people in a great narrative defined by the unfolding story and hope of the scriptures.

Centralizing the Son of God in Our Mission Scripture calls us to “consider Jesus, the Apostle and High Priest of our confession” (Hebrews 3:1). We learn that our credal affirmation of truth, our “confession” of faith and hope, should first of all extol the risen Son as the magnificent Apostle, “faithful” to build and to preside over “the house of God” (3:2–6). He is the Apostle who forms a people from and within every people. Only by his faithfulness do his people become apostolic in the midst of their communities. This one is also our High Priest, even now gathering worshipers from every nation, serving

and sanctifying them so that they become a spectacle of God-loving glory in the earth. Let us consider him.

The living God has exalted him to be Lord and Christ of his kingdom. He is head of the church his body. He is the long-awaited seed of Abraham, causing the nations to flourish with blessing. He is the greater Son of David, now building a house made without hands, of which the latter glory will surpass any before. Let us consider him as we labor among the nations. Let us consider him as we work to deepen, to strengthen, and to reconfigure our missiology. Anything of worth will come *from* him, be enacted *through* him, and will come *to* him again in relational glory. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹In private conversation, Winter told me that the word choice in naming the event reflected the influence of some of the faculty of Fuller’s School of World Mission.

²Winter’s assertion about the evangelistic efficacy of local churches was built on dozens of church growth studies done by others that had been supervised by the School of World Mission faculty.

³Ralph Winter learned of Walter Kaiser’s ideas about the Abrahamic promise in the late 1970s, which led to the inclusion of Kaiser’s 1981 article in the *Perspectives* volume (Kaiser, 1981, 25–34). As early as 1977 Kaiser had published the beginnings of what he would call “epangelical theology” (after the Greek word for “promise,” *epaggelia*) in which the Abrahamic covenant is of primary importance: “The scope of the seventy nations listed in Genesis 10, when taken with the promise of Genesis 12:3 that in Abraham’s seed ‘all the nations of the earth [viz., those just listed in Genesis 10] shall be blessed,’ constitutes the original missionary mandate itself” (Kaiser 1977, 98–99). See also “The Christian and the Old Testament” published in 1998 by William Carey Library, and the simpler, shorter work, “Mission in the Old Testament: Israel as a Light to the Nations,” published in 2000 by Baker Books.

⁴The disabilities group became “Group 6B” which meant the unreached peoples mini-consultation became “Group 6A.” Fifty people are listed as participating in the frontier mission group, but many

more participated. Kent Parks and Werner Jahnke were recognized as conveners and key authors of the report (Claydon 2005, 340–396). As I understand it, the Ethne to Ethne network, largely led by non-Westerners, found momentum in the relationships confirmed at the 2004 event.

⁵Historian Pierce Beaver has noted that “the glory of God” was “the prime factor which moved the missionaries” in early American, colonial-era mission endeavors (Beaver 1962, 217). Before the turn of the 19th century, the dominant motivation in American mission was *gloria Dei*. Beaver claims that key figures such as Cotton Mather, John Eliot, David Brainerd, and Jonathan Edwards all found primary motivation and theology of mission centered on the glory of God with hope for the coming Kingdom. But suddenly, soon after 1810 “*gloria Dei* as a motive vanishes almost overnight...and the all-compelling motive” became “obedience to Christ’s Great Commission” (Beaver 1968, 139–141).

⁶Piper is well aware that a mission theology that centralizes the glory of God revives some of the best Puritan convictions of Jonathan Edwards. See Piper’s *God’s Passion for His Glory: Living the Vision of Jonathan Edwards* (1998).

⁷What named lineages does Paul see to be in heaven? It is highly unlikely that the lineages “in heaven” are angelic. It is possible that they are peoples or tribes that have become extinct or in some way have been lost among the peoples dwelling on earth.

⁸See the article I co-authored with Sarita Gallagher, “Blessing as Transformation” in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, Fourth Edition and also *Mission Frontiers*, <http://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/blessing-as-transformation>.

⁹Ralph Winter came up with the term “regular” missions to describe cross-cultural endeavors among people groups that had already experienced a missiological breakthrough. In these cases, the work that we could consider “frontier” missions is complete.

¹⁰There is a vast literature about the expectation of a “new exodus” among Jewish people at the time of Christ.

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